Everyday Echoes Among African Scholars and Raconteurs

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Essays, Short Stories and Poems

Edited by

Augustine Agwuele, Edna Ogeto
and Bonface Otieno Okinyi

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DEDICATION

For those we have loved and lost they remain
A heart vaults a weathered fence steady and brave
Woodsmoke drifts from a mother's fire soft and warm

You linger in whispers in rustling rain
In the flicker of flame in all that they gave
For those we have loved and lost they remain

The stretch of a road its winding refrain
Fades into the horizon vast and grave
Woodsmoke drifts from a mother's fire soft and warm

Through shadows and silence, they call our name
Not gone but carried in the moments we save
For those we have loved and lost they remain

In the quiet of grief, we find them again
Their love is the echo that still makes us brave
For those we have loved and lost they remain
Woodsmoke drifts from a mother's fire soft and warm

EO & AA

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NOTE FROM SERIES EDITOR

With the motto "the scholarship of now for the people of now", this series, Studies in African Humanities, offers cross disciplinary elucidation of those issues germane to the well being of the people of African and African Diaspora. Works appearing in the Series cut across disciplines in the Humanities as a result of the interconnectivity of the different disciplines as well as the inseparability of life concerns. Linguistics, economic, culture, political, gender, religion, and identity issues, to mention a few, are matters that cannot be dichotomized and compartmentalized. Their explication also would require more than a singular disciplinary perspective. The books in this Series will give African voices to African issues in their various manifestations with deference to their contexts and complexities.

Augustine Agwuele
Series Editor

INTRODUCTION

EVERYDAY ECHOES: AFRICAN SCHOLARS AND RACONTEURS (ESSAYS, SHORT STORIES, AND POEMS)

EDNA OGETO & AUGUSTINE AGWUELE

Everyday Echoes: African Scholars and Raconteurs brings together scholars, artivists, and storytellers to explore everyday concerns of African peoples through scholarly essays, engaging short stories, and evocative poems. Given the contemporary challenges facing the continent, a fresh approach is needed to illuminate those life encompassing perennial issues. Such an approach should draw from a diverse range of perspectives, disciplines and genres, and employ versatile sources such as archival data, ethnography, songs, storytelling, and cultural ideologies. Just as the continent is diverse with distributed information and knowledge across peoples and cultures, all with the same goal of finding solutions to persistent problems, the anthology integrates different ways of knowing, approaching issues, and of finding solutions to them. Thus, pan-disciplinary themes and approaches are offered to the pan-African quest for emancipated living, such that each theme within a setting unveils local concerns that also implicate the continent as a whole. Like life itself, it contains non-affective and affective representations of social facts, offering a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted challenges and potential solutions.

Consider, for instance, stories, which, per Achebe (1974) are the very heart of our civilization and culture. Recognizing the power and magic of words, Africa stories its people, who consequently evoke the stories variously to shape their society. Despite the prevalence of literacy, orature holds sway; along with its functionality, the beauty, the elegance of clearly woven words, and the carefully curated imageries reflective of every day experiences are creatively deployed to reawaken consciousness, to repurpose energies; to instruct, correct and bring into fruition latent ideas, and quite importantly, to unify the society. Those performances of the

village square, and those processions winding down the various streets connecting the ruler to the ruled, the rich to the poor, are like the words of the scholars and artistes that exclude none. They are, according to the Yoruba, like mud struck with a rod, it splashes on everyone, and no one is immune from its impact. These words speak to the deeds of all—great and small, good or destructive. Through words, we recreate the world of those who created them, encoding their values and world sense, and each individual positions themselves in relation to the others. And for many of the stories here, a form of revanchism is intended with their written words. While the performative aspects, such as the intonations, the change in timber, pitch and gestures synonymous with the performances of raconteurs may not be easily captured with the written words, a poor substitute, they nevertheless find expressivity in the images, pictures and metaphor in the words used by the contributors.

Songs, for instance, possess an immediacy that imbues them with captivating magic. Accompanied by beats, they enchant the mind and invigorate the body simultaneously. Differently, prose, with its unique allure, pierces deeply, gripping the soul and haunting it relentlessly. When spoken in one's native language, words evoke a person's entire being—from their earliest memories and childhood images to associated experiences and tastes. Requiring no mediation, each word carries affective- rationality; it is potent in its ability to stir people into action. Indeed, words are instruments of agency that are used to do things as Austin (1975) described.

The inexorable power of words to shape reality allows words to both reflect and influence societal dynamics. Among all institutional constructs, the ideals of a people are distilled in words. Their malleability empowers raconteurs and scholars to recount the African litany, and advocate sociability, unity, promoting progress, good governance, and citizenship—ultimately fostering equity and communal wellness such that individuals can prospect for the good life according to their values.

Everyday Echoes: African Scholars and Raconteurs is divided into three parts: essays, short stories, and poems, all revolving around the pertinent everyday issues of existence.

Part 1 consists of eight essays. In Chapter One, Wanjala S. Nasong’o introduces the concepts of transactional and transformational leadership. He contrasts the first two years of the late Thomas Sankara's leadership in Burkina Faso with that of William Ruto, the current President of Kenya. Nasong’o illustrates that, unlike the transactional leadership prevalent in many independent African countries, Sankara’s revolutionary government was transformative. Sankara’s leadership transcended personal gain and aimed to provide a dignified existence for the people. In contrast, Ruto's

transactional leadership operates under the mantra of "what is in it for me" rather than "what is best for the country." Nasong'o's critique of transactional leadership in Kenya appears prophetic, given the spate of current mass demonstrations by the so-called Gen-Z, forcing the government to temporarily address the plight of ordinary citizens, including the President sacking his whole cabinet. Nasong'o argues that this form of leadership perpetuates imperialism across the continent. President Ruto, according to Nasong'o, has succumbed to Western influence, accruing unnecessary debt to support a bloated government and opaque projects. This has led to heavy taxation, pushing people into poverty and prompting protests from the younger generation against a mortgaged future, high national debt, unemployment, and fraudulent contracts. Contrastively, Nasong'o highlights that Sankara's government was guided by the philosophy that Burkina Faso must produce what it consumes and only consumes what it produced. Sankara believed that whoever feeds you controls you. He rejected the harmful influences of religion and foreign aid, while Ruto, like many leaders in Nigeria, Ghana, and other African countries, embraced these influences. In these countries, religion has become politicized, and politics has become religionized. This conflation leads to the exploitation of people, who are taxed and 'tithed' into poverty.

While Sheriff Folarin in Chapter 3 depicts a form of reconciliation and reconstruction that highlighted the political determination of post-genocide Rwanda, Zakes Mda's novel presents a different yet equally significant form of catharsis and social reconciliation in a fictionalized post-apartheid South African community. In chapter 2, Maureen Eke explores Mda's *Ways of Dying*, revealing how the novel suggests that post-apartheid South Africa bears both the seeds of self-destruction and survival. According to Mda, this duality arises because South Africa struggles with an incoherent and fragmented memory of its past. However, communal reconciliation and healing are possible through the individual and collective willingness to confront the 'truth' of the past, history, and memory. Eke's study of Mda's work reveals that healing and reconciliation do not necessarily need to be state sponsored. Nevertheless, reconciled coexistence is crucial for the survival of a nation like South Africa, which has endured tremendous trauma. This collective act of reconnecting with one another becomes a new testimony and experience, emphasizing that personal survival is inextricably linked to the survival of others.

Eke's powerful and insightful explication of Mda's *Ways of Dying* resonates across the African continent. It is not only South Africa that has experienced trauma; many countries in Africa have faced internecine conflict, pogroms, warfare, and terrorist attacks fueled by religious and

ideological motives. In light of this, it is important to recognize that the talk of reconciliation is not merely rhetoric or wishful thinking but can be purposefully undertaken by a government, as demonstrated in chapter three by Folarin regarding Rwanda.

In chapter 3, Folarin provides pictorial documentation of the transformation that Rwanda is experiencing 30 years after the devastating genocide that took nearly a million lives within 30 days. During this period, Hutus and Tutsis found themselves engulfed in consuming animosity. Aside from Ghana, which in 1972 officially outlawed the word "tribe," Rwanda is the only country in Africa that constitutionally prohibits the official designation of its people by their ethnic affiliation or origin. In Rwanda, there are only Rwandans. In contrast, barely one year after taking office amidst soaring living costs, a weakened currency, terrorism, a bloated government, corruption, and sectarian violence, Nigeria's President reinstated the previous National Anthem, which was composed for the country by non-Nigerians and includes the word 'tribe.' This term carries connotations of being uncivilized, dangerous, uncontrolled, and superstitious, and creates an image of an inferior or subhuman people (Wiley & Croft, 1984: 63-65; see also p'Bitek 1971).

Folarin reported as an eyewitness. Despite the progress he documented, opinions remain divided about the rule of President Kagame and his commitment to democracy. Kagame has ruthlessly restricted opposition, changed the constitution to allow him to stay in power, and despite his social engineering where ethnicity is no longer officially recognized, his rulership has relied primarily on Tutsis, his ethnic group, and has differentially benefited them relative to other groups in the country. For instance, despite both Hutus and Tutsis being victims of the genocide, in 2014, 20 years after the genocide, Kagame's regime officially recognized and renamed the Rwandan genocide to "the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi," a change accepted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1998. This shift in terminology immediately changes the narrative of blame and accountability. Even the annual commemoration of the 1994 genocide, termed Kwibuka, remains a period of angst for survivors and increased accusations of genocidal ideology and 'tribalism.'

Finally, it is necessary to explore the true extent of the overt transformation documented in the pictures. Are they merely cosmetic changes due to Kagame's skilled political rhetoric, an art form recognized by Rwandans as "ubwenge," or are they truly beneficial to all? It is also worth examining if Kagame, like Ruto of Kenya and unlike the late Sankara, is beholden to the West, which finances 70% of Rwanda's national budget, despite his much-publicized anti-West rhetoric.

In chapter 4, Chukwu explores popular culture through the prism of philosophy. According to existentialists, he suggests, existence is fundamentally absurd; individuals find themselves on Earth without the guidance of any immaterial being determining their path. Consequently, each person bears sole responsibility for shaping their own existence, taking initiative and asserting material agency over their humanity. This concept, epitomized by Sartrean existentialism and expanded upon by Camus (2015), likens human life to Sisyphus' eternal task, where individuals engage in mundane pursuits in search of happiness. Popular culture, once dismissed by some African philosophers influenced by universalism as trivial, now emerges as a crucial avenue for self-empowerment and the creation of existential meaning. In Chapter 4, Chukwu explores how various art forms within popular culture enable Africans to navigate challenging socio-economic conditions and shape their destinies with hope and inspiration, despite facing a bad hand of fate and constrained socio-economic possibilities. He illustrates the utility of this genre in finding essence for existence, and how embracing life's absurdities can lead to personal empowerment and achievement, drawing upon the life and work of Nigerian musician and socio-political activist Fela Kuti. Chukwu's analysis underscores popular culture's role in facilitating existential fulfillment and the pursuit of the "good life" on Earth, offering a pathway to discover essence within one's existence. This empowerment inspires them to overcome their circumstances and shape their futures with hope and determination.

Despite enduring both direct and indirect subjugation, Africans, like people everywhere, aspire to a harmonious existence. In their pursuit, they grapple with a tripartite heritage—traditional, Western, and external religious influences (Mazrui 1986). This intricate coexistence is exemplified in the AbaGusii people, as detailed by Nyamwange, who provides a comprehensive overview of Gusii cosmology. The poet and performer, Monyoncho, vividly captures these layers of worldview in his performances, deftly contextualizing them amidst historical shifts, evolving identities, and challenges posed by Christianity and colonialism, including the imposition of Western education. These factors have profoundly shaped the Gusii people's relationship with their environment and each other. Despite these changes, the Gusii navigate this dynamic landscape with a pragmatic approach to personal survival, blending tradition with contemporary conveniences, as reflected in Monyoncho's popular poetry depicting Gusii life.

While Africa's three heritages, as highlighted by Mazrui, often appear incongruous, Africans pragmatically extract what is useful from each. They

recognize, for example, the interconnectedness of the body with the mind, leading them to explore alternative approaches to mental health beyond those prescribed by Western education, religion, and conventional medicine. Every society possesses its indigenous knowledge systems spanning various domains. This includes environmental and ecological insights crucial for addressing climate change (Owusu-Ansah and Mji, 2013; Pearce, 2018), agricultural practices and weather forecasting (Irumva et al., 2021), as well as traditional wisdom concerning physical and mental well-being."

In 2019, Mwalimu investigated the continuity and change within the therapeutic systems among the Gusii people, showing how their worldview and cosmology influence their approach to indigenous medicine. The role of belief systems is illustrated through a case study of a condition attributed to 'witchcraft', which responded to Omoragori's intervention after conventional Western medicine had proven ineffective. In Chapter 6, Agwuele and Nyamweya provide an eyewitness account of a mental health case, believed to result from a malevolent neighbor's attack, that found relief through alternative healing methods rather than conventional medical treatment. Chapter 7, authored by Agwuele and Mong'are, explores the role of songs as a form of documentation of life among the AbaGusii of Kisii, examining how oral traditions encapsulate their existence and life stages.

In 1976, Nigerian musician Sunny Okosun lamented in his 1978 hit song 'Fire in Soweto,' that was "burning all my people', referencing the June 16, 1976, student-led riot in Soweto. The protest erupted against the South African apartheid government's plan to impose Afrikaans as the language of instruction for African (Black) students. This move aimed not only to restrict access to education, but also to erase the languages and cultural identities of South African peoples, favoring English and Afrikaans. The imposition of apartheid and colonial languages, which most South Africans only used within the system, sparked strong resistance. Approximately 580 protesting students tragically lost their lives. Language policy, deemed a necessary but contentious tool, profoundly impacts academic success within formal education systems across African nations today. Education, as with all state policies, must serve the people. In Chapter 8, Palakyem Mouzou explicates the critical issue of educational and language policies in Togo from a diachronic perspective. He outlines the various phases and political dimensions involved, including the political and institutional structures that influence the different phases of the language policy in the country ranging from government agencies, private and interest groups, ultimately proposing guidelines that prioritize linguistic inclusivity and educational equity.

Parts 2 and 3 of *Everyday Echoes: African Scholars and Raconteurs* feature short stories and poems, respectively. Being the conscience of the nation, critics of societal ills, illustrators of the individual and collective woes, and chief entertainers that offer succor even when humorously spreading the dirty linen in public, the poet and short story writers bring to us the persistent struggle in coping with perennial and persistent life questions in the face of endless want. As Anne Anjao writes in her story, Scarcity demeans. Poverty sucks. Paucity stinks, it causes one to constantly contend with existential questions, moral questions, political questions, and eventually to get into a duel with life itself. One hears that familiar phrase: to be or not to be, that is the question.

The writers further explore, narrate, and creatively recast the quotidian, the ordinary, and the seemingly trivial aspects of life—terms often employed by 'serious' scholars to dismiss such issues, viewing them as insignificant and trifle. However, upon closer examination, these constitute the essence of daily existence. These various stories and poems collected in Parts 2 and 3 rediscover and re-examine these elements of life, suggesting their indispensable role in life, and underscoring them as the irrepressible essentials of life.

Eke's Mda (Part One, chapter 2) suggests that art is restorative, despite the potential for inaccuracies in recasting or recuperating the past. Nevertheless, the arts emphasize their recuperative, cathartic, and healing aspects. The short stories include an autobiographical extract that traces intertwined journeys to identity within familial contexts. They explore the inner lives of ordinary individuals navigating a world marked by poverty, racism, and violence yet fueled by resilience and hope (e.g., "Ackee Tree and Me" Chapter 2:1, Tidjani Alou).

Life's paradoxes are poignantly captured, where seriousness is juxtaposed with the absurd: like a young girl returning from school to find her older sister in labor (Mwaita's Namesake, chapter 2.7) and having to deliver the baby; witnessing the tragic death of the family's only son due to alcoholism, or enduring destitution and abuse, like in Naomi Kimonye's "The Handicap Business."(chapter 2.4)

These narratives also explore encounters with the unfamiliar, from first experiences in cities to navigating different climates like snow and train rides in Europe (Ogeto, chapter 3.3). The mundane also includes harmattan, that time of the year when cold, dusty wind pierces the skin, when the mornings are with shivers, and morning showers become a very quick affair, barring hot water. Maureen Eke (chapter 2.12) captures the harsh harmattan winds in Kano. Climate change occupies Anyour (chapter 3.8) who bemoans its dire toll on the living and the material environment. This degradation of

the environment enders amongst many things strife, and ultimately war. Teferi's narrative in “confessions” (chapter 2.13) vividly portrays the ravages of war in Ethiopia—death, displacement, and separation tearing families apart, leaving refugees with no clear reason for the conflict's devastation. In these tales, dystopian tragedies intertwine with everyday life, highlighting the resilience and challenges faced by individuals across different contexts. Such as occurs when an innocent young girl travels to the city for the first time and loses the only means of reaching the only relative to whom one was going (Hell in the city by Shamte Ngurangwa, chapter 2:10).

That the continent is the only one losing about 20,000 of its youth annually to the Sahara and the Mediterranean is not lost on some who bemoan the difficult times confronting the people in their daily lives. With hope they studied, they accepted the promise of the youth being the leader of tomorrow, they recited the pledges, accepted the rhetoric of patriotism, the imported religion ceaselessly impressed on them the need for honesty, holiness, trust in God who would fling them to the abyss of hell if they did not accept Jesus, who would bless them if they did. All in vain. With hopes dashed, promised not fulfilled, the state wallowing in money squandered on personal aggrandizement, the rich and powerful, the dynasty and the hustlers, competing on who would own the largest size of land in the country, and whose ill-gotten money would flow intergenerationally ceaselessly. Consequently, the public coffer becomes personal bank account, the state services become personal fiefdom, and the justice system becomes an instrument for enforcing personal will, for ensuring that critics simply disappear, and that perpetrators and their accomplices are immediately acquitted of their verifiable crimes, confirming that the man does not burn. Authority stealing! The poets and storytellers lament the woeful state into which individuals are plunged, as well as the neglect and the rot within the system.

In the midst of all these, there comes a dystopian exegesis of us, the ones whose kernels were cracked for them by the gods, and the ones who are just meat for the others that they meet. Fate seems vaunted, the hopelessness of life seems eulogized, and despite this, there is yet life to be lived, maiden to be courted. The art of courtship, the beauty of the dance around romance, those features that a man of old sought in the would-be spouse are the described, the spies that participated in making sure that she embodies all the values of the time, in industriousness, work ethics, cleanliness, demeanor, and treatment of strangers and families. Nevertheless, once, we all waited with Samuel Beckett for Godot, and now we wait with Ogalo (chapter 2.5) for love. *A mystery that thrives on reciprocity but as often, one*

*sided, Papa loves us, but why did we walk out on him, why do you fight him whenever he visits, yet you cry every night? You go out to work, come home exhausted, and sometimes you reek of alcohol, why can't we go back, he loves us. Then mama took my hands, spit in them like my people do when they are blessing you and then said, "I pray that you find love in this life but what's more I pray that you find the courage to love in return… I always waited for your father to love me, but he didn't. That man you call papa, I know he loves us very much but chil*d…" While others fall tragically in love with the wrong people, others' tragic love involves romantic deception as artfully storied by Warimu (the tragic dance of the hearts, chapter 2.3) or they are betrayed (Pixelated betrayal, chapter 2.7). In other cases, the union of hearts compels daily hurtful endurance of the aches that comes with loving someone across continents (Ogeto, chapter 3.5), or such that comes with loving and waiting endlessly for it to be requited (Waiting by Ogalo, chapter 2.5). Likewise, it is to graduate from the university and to be jobless, and for the hopelessness of it to plunge one into poverty and desperation, tempting some into crime and leading to life-altering consequences (A Ticking Time Bomb by Anne Eboi, chapter 2.8). Another harsh reality is quitting a job at a spouse's insistence, only to be abandoned later, prompting a firm resolve never to be taken advantage of again, and leading to the resolve to quit stupidity as storied in Chapter 2.9, by Ndung'u. The perennial saga of dealing with mothers-in-law, a common theme in marriages, is poignantly explored in Marren Akong'o's poem Your tongue in-law (chapter 3:19), finally, Maximillia Muninzwa in Sleep my love (chapter 2:11 narrates the challenges of widowhood, its loneliness as well as the inheritance practices that disinherits a woman from the wealth of her family at the passing of her husband, or where the institution of levirate passes her on to another family member, all of these calls up in her resilience and fortitude.

Motivation and Scope

Many are the vicissitudes of life, they are perennial, they are dynamic and ceaseless. Tomorrow will undoubtedly differ from today; hence, diviners seek weekly counsel with the gods. This dynamic condition includes relentless struggles with those ever-present quotidian issues. Whether it's hunger, unemployment, or imported death contraptions, called vehicles, whose foreign consuls remain inscrutable, these challenges are numerous. They also include the daily heartaches due to the police disappearing people, the *bodaboda* or *okada* riders seemingly endowed with spiritual invincibility, who, believing they will never die in road accidents, recklessly endanger other road users. We also contend with government-distributed

fake fertilizers, mercury-laden sugar, E-coli-contaminated vegetables, HIV/AIDS, and teenage pregnancy. This results in a perpetual Tom and Jerry-like drama between the people and their governmental and non-governmental institutions. At times, these battles extend to global issues, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which demands mask-wearing, maintaining six feet of artificial distance, and vaccinations. Comply with international regulations we must; their handouts our lifeline, for paying the piper, the tune is prescribed.

These societal challenges capture the attention of social observers. Scholars, artists, and activists perceive their societies through unique lenses. Their work does not emerge from a vacuum; it is fueled by both studied and lived experiences. They each in their own way vividly describe the society they live in, they flesh out, not just in theory, but also evidentially, the life of its current people, institutions, and they advocate for change. Their interest lies not just in describing and interpreting society but in transforming it. Theorization without practical societal improvement holds no value in their work. They draw from historical knowledge and contemporary information to intervene in current practices, aiming to positively influence the course of events for the betterment of the people.

Being African often means navigating such a paradox of profound frustration and enduring hope. The frustration arises from the stark realities of waste and decay, palpable in our streets and institutions. Yet, equally visible are the pathways to reform and renewal. It's perplexing that despite the means and opportunities to create an equitable, just society that prioritizes the well-being of the majority, the necessary will, commitment, and investment often seem lacking or elusive.

In voicing their perspectives, these various contributing writers in *Everyday Echoes: African Scholars and Raconteurs* draw from firsthand experiences within their communities, where they share unmediated bonds and interactions. They are eyewitnesses to the daily struggles and triumphs, bridging continents like Tidajni Alou (Jamaica and Niger) or drawing from direct engaged from conducting extensive fieldwork over decades like Folarin and Nasong'o in Rwanda, Kenya, and Burkina Faso, and Eke in South Africa, all the while navigating academic structures in the West. When not crossing continents many of the contributors lead lives that bridge communities and languages, reflecting a common African experience. Remarkably, each contributor is naturally trilingual, attuned to their surroundings, and adept at highlighting the nuanced realities of their environments.

Life unfolds locally, prompting scholars and artists, deeply embedded within their communities, to feel a moral imperative to reflect on the